

Lal Balkaran (2002).

**Dictionary of the Guyanese Amerindians, and Other
South American Native Terms: An A-Z Guide To Their
Anthropology, Cosmology, Culture, Exploration,
History, Geography, Legend, Folklore And Myth.**

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OVERVIEW

Lal Balkaran's Dictionary of the Guyanese Amerindians is comprehensive enough that it comes close to being an encyclopaedia. Balkaran provides coverage of some anthropological concepts, Amerindian cosmology, culture, histories of exploration of Guyana by European explorers, the history of Guyana with reference to Amerindians, geography, legends, folklore, myth, ethnobotany, ethnohistory, music, and politics. It is an impressive volume that clearly involved considerable research, as well as personal experience and knowledge. Apart from certain issues concerning the author's personal perspective (see below), this volume would be ideal for students, novice ethnographers, and those planning to undertake archival research. [1]

The volume boasts of over 5,000 entries and includes profiles of early explorers, early anthropologists in Guyana, and an Amerindian "Who's Who" throughout the text. Included in the Dictionary are maps of Amerindian population distribution, a detailed time line from 11,000 BC to 2001 AD, samples of Amerindian vocabularies, lists of governors of Guyana and priests who served there, and 22 photographs. Additional information on Amerindian tribes in Venezuela, Suriname, and Brazil is provided, as well as lists of minerals, animals, timbers, waterfalls and rapids, rivers, mountains and mountain ranges, and Amerindian villages in Guyana. Throughout the Dictionary there is exceptional coverage of a very wide range of colonial figures: priests, magistrates,

commissioners, miners, settlers, ranchers, explorers, officers, prospectors, merchants—some possibly obscured or omitted from the mainstream literature, instead presented here in great detail—and all tied to Amerindians in some fashion. The actual dictionary part of the volume is to be found from pages 29 to 174. [2]

This is apparently a self published text. The independent nature of this project is both one of its strengths and weaknesses, as I shall discuss below. [3]

Lal Balkaran is also the author of several business management and accounting books. Starting in 1970, Balkaran served as a primary school teacher among the Wapishanas of the South Rupununi savannahs for five years. During that time, he kept notes, collected books, record albums, and artwork. As he explains, he hunted with his Amerindian neighbours, fished with them, participated in feasts, observed their taboos, and lived like them. The author clearly possesses a wide-ranging cognitive map of Guyanese Amerindian ethnography, derived from personal experience and contacts, and this is often made explicit in the text. [4]

This is an independent enterprise, as I mentioned. As Lal Balkaran puts it, “I am an amateur when it comes to the range of subjects covered in this work” (p. xiv). Balkaran also asks: “why can’t an internal auditor write on the indigenous peoples of his native Guyana?” (p. xiv). There is nothing to say the he cannot, or should not, and members of the reading public will welcome his initiative. Self publication, and being an amateur (in the positive and original sense of the word, as in “the lover of a subject”) are not inherently negative shortcomings of a work, and not the best way to assess it either. On the other hand, there is no reason for an independent writer not to seek out peer review prior to publication, and to obtain constructive criticisms that should be used to revise a text prior to publication. [5]

Clearly the non-academic world is impatient and anxious for the empirical information held by academics but largely left scattered and unavailable to the public. There is a craving for data on Caribbean Amerindians by interested members of the general public. Indeed, the opening quote of the volume speaks to this craving: “The desire of knowledge, like the thirst of riches, increases ever with the acquisition of it” (Laurence Sterne). What Lal Balkaran has done is to take up the slack left by academics. [6]

PERSPECTIVES

While the text succeeds in terms of the depth and wide range of empirical content, readers such as myself might find themselves very disappointed with the author’s perspective as found in some of the entries and in his own introduction. In some ways, this text resembles some old fashioned explorers’ handbooks given its eclectic and detailed coverage. Yet, one of the unfortunate similarities with early European chronicles is the text’s equally old-fashioned ethnocentrism. The “civilization versus barbarism” dichotomy, which one would hope would have died out by now, receives a new lease on life in this volume. This text would most likely be favoured by Christian missionaries

with an unrepentant attitude towards the past, as it contains more praise than criticism, and avidly endorses evangelisation. [7]

I will provide a random assortment of some examples to highlight the above. Balkaran argues that, “throughout South America, Christianity through Roman Catholic missions brought stability, education, and civilization” (p. xiii), this in spite of voluminous accounts and testimonies as to the exact opposite. What is worse is that he follows up this assertion with a quote from Bartolomé Herrera (p. xiii), who makes Amerindians sound decidedly like unintelligent, moribund sods living in darkness. This is hardly the basis of respect that is necessary for understanding and appreciating Amerindian culture in order to faithfully describe it. Balkaran also speaks of Amazonian tribes being brought to civilization (p. xii), again without mentioning acts of genocide, land theft, disease, social dissolution, and other forms of devastation. In other instances, the author calls the Spanish Arawaks “culturally advanced,” after he details their Hispanisation (p. 123), without explaining what it is that makes them “advanced”. Similarly, he states that the “Wapishanas became civilized faster than the Macushis” (p. 168). Balkaran tends to cast reservations in a good light, as designed for the protection of Amerindians, without considering how this strategy was also convenient for colonisers who sought to marginalise Amerindians in terms of territorial ownership.[8]

At certain points, readers such as myself might find the underlying ethnocentrism of the commentary to be quite unacceptable. In one case, Balkaran asserts: “The Arawaks are aptly regarded [by whom he does not say] as the upper caste of the Amerindian tribes (the equivalent of a Brahman in Hinduism), and are superior to the other tribes in terms of civilization” (p. 41). Ironically, in a dictionary that defines words such as “hill”, “waterfall” and “creek”, the author did not see fit to write an entry for “civilization”, thus failing to define the very loaded terms that he uses, thereby evading examination of his own assumptions. In writing, “an Amerindian life revolves around a hammock” (p. 85), Balkaran is unfortunately lending further weight to stereotypical depictions of the supposedly ‘idle and indolent ways of the native.’ This is where an independent project can manifest its greatest shortcomings, that is, in failing to emerge from vigorous discussion within a wider community of critically minded researchers. While Balkaran take the time to outline certain key anthropological concepts, one of the pillars of anthropological approaches, “cultural relativism”, is sorely absent from the narrative.[9]

Balkaran reserves his superlatives for when he writes about certain colonial figures, revealing more about his opinion of certain individuals, than telling us about the individuals themselves. As one example, the author writes: “Gravesande had much courage, was loyal, incorruptible and fiercely devoted to Guyana...He gave us Demerara, opened up the Essequibo, established a solid and proven basis to relate to the Amerindians and loved Guyana just as he loved Holland”, whilst bemoaning the fact that no place in Guyana is named after him—“this is indeed a shame,” Balkaran adds (p. 82). He almost writes as if he personally knew this historical figure. In my view, there is no place for such commentary in a “dictionary”, with all of the connotations of factuality and objectivity which that word carries. In addition, I would especially say that there is

no place for that in a dictionary on Amerindians, who already had Demerara and to whom the Essequibo was already “open”, whatever the author may have meant by that. [10]

Every author is of course entitled to his or her own perspective. However, the issues raised above are well worn, and simple assertions without self-critical analysis and evidentiary support do not gain much respect. There is a voluminous literature concerning the social, cultural and psychological impact of Christian missionizing—as this is largely absent from Balkaran’s text, one is given the impression that there is a wide consensus on his viewpoint. Aside from these considerations, preaching to the reader is quite out of place in writing dictionary entries.[11]

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

One of the recurring shortcomings of the dictionary aspect of the text was the inclusion of redundant entries. For example, Balkaran supplies definitions for “Artesian wells,” “creek,” “dredging,” “hill,” and “waterfall.” The meaning of these words is so commonly understood, that one must wonder why they are included. I would suggest that there is no need for the author to try to do the job of a regular, generic dictionary. Inevitably this will lead to a loss of focus. In a revised edition of this text, Balkaran might consider removing such entries. [12]

Colloquialisms, and some minor factual errors, convey an impression that there was a lack of pre-publication review. On page 140, Lawrence Keymis is renamed “Leonard Keymis.” In the case of Kateri Tekawitha, Balkaran states that she converted to Catholicism in 1676, but first came into contact with the French missionaries in 1677, which seems to say that she converted before ever meeting any missionary (p. 158). On page 96 one encounters this phrase: “his likeness for human flesh”. In some instances, the author substitutes his personal opinion for fact, i.e.: “Although the Angel Falls in Venezuela, is the world’s largest, the sheer beauty and grandeur of Kaieteur has, by far, much more appeal” (p. 99). These are minor details in a volume with disproportionately greater strengths, but they may give an impression of haste. [13]

In terms of the author’s research using secondary sources, Balkaran explains that, “the Toronto Reference Library was my principal source of research” (p. xv). There is no inherent problem with that, except that he could also have used some of the impressive Caribbean collections housed at York University, or materials located at the University of Toronto, which has one of the largest university library collections in North America. My own suggestion would be to expand the coverage of the research and to invite greater input from scholars doing research on the Amerindians of Guyana. [14]

In addition, given the eclectic and detailed coverage of the text, I was left unsure as to whether or not a dictionary format was best for this material. Even in the text as it stands now, Balkaran would have enough material to reorganise and consolidate the entries in the form of an encyclopaedia, for example, with a through entry under the heading of “Legends,” rather than listing each legend separately and alphabetically by the name of the main protagonist or phenomenon featured in the legend. In fact, that might even be more helpful to readers who might not know by which name to search for a legend, and

who may also not wish to read the entire text to find a particular legend. Ultimately, the author might concede the need for Amerindians to finally write their own dictionaries for Amerindians, as an exercise in preservation and transmission of knowledge (especially to the young), and which we, as readers, are allowed to share. Perhaps, if reworked into an encyclopaedia format, the author could then function more clearly as an editor instead, and seek contributions from both scholars and Amerindian representatives. [15]

AUDIENCE RECOMMENDATION

One of my first thoughts on who might benefit the most from the publication of *The Dictionary of Guyanese Amerindians* was school children in Guyana, the Caribbean and further afield perhaps. However, I would only suggest marketing the book in this manner once latent ethnocentrism, in the ways that I highlighted, has been drained from the actual dictionary entries themselves. [16]

I generally recommend this as a useful information resource which can serve as an important guide and companion for novice researchers and ethnographers, and as a useful map for those thinking of doing archival research concerning the history of Guyana and colonial governance over its Amerindians especially. In addition, the text is well written, in clear and widely accessible language, which renders it more useful to a wide variety of audiences. [17]

Reviewer

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